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STATE SENATOR • 17TH SENATE DISTRICT

Capitol Update

By Senator Howard Marklein

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Building Slides For Cliffs

A main function of our state government is to provide assistance for Wisconsin citizens who need support. From the Foodshare program to child care subsidies to energy programs, some Wisconsin families need help to get through hard times.

Unfortunately, the same programs that are meant to help people overcome adversity in order to get back on their feet, often place our citizens on the edge of a cliff. Many public assistance programs have strict income-based criteria that encourages recipients to keep their income at a certain level in order to qualify for and receive benefits. If the recipient is offered more hours, gets a raise, a promotion or a new job that pays more, they may lose their benefits. They may fall off of the cliff.

The cliff is the moment when a family's income disqualifies them from eligibility to receive a public benefit. Many programs have an all-or-nothing cliffs. You either receive the benefit – or you don't.

The central issue is that the extra hours, raise, promotion or new job's salary may not be enough to replace the lost benefits. As a result, many recipients decline extra hours, turn down promotions or refuse job offers so that they can keep their benefits and stay on the cliff. This is contrary to the purpose of public assistance. We want to help people overcome obstacles and rise above, not encourage them to maintain poverty.

According to a survey of Wisconsin's benefit programs, the average family of four will qualify for most assistance programs until they make a combined annual income of around \$45,000. The income guidelines for each program vary. You can find definitions and income guidelines here:

<https://www.benefits.gov/benefits/browse-by-state/state/191> These benefits may be a combination of Foodshare, child care subsidies, energy assistance, medical assistance and more. Most of these programs are Federal programs that the state administers through the Department of Health Services and county-level deployment.

As Federal programs passed through the state, we do not have much local control over the criteria and administration of these programs. If we want to make changes to the program, we need to seek approval from the Federal government.

It is for this reason that I recently joined my legislative colleagues to request a waiver from the Federal government to create sliding scales for many public benefit programs that do not already have them.

http://www.thewheelerreport.com/wheeler_docs/files/016darlingletter.pdf

Sliding scales will allow us to provide assistance to families as their income increases. Sliding scales gradually decrease the public benefit as the family's income rises. This removes some of the disincentive

to work more hours, accept a promotion or take a new job. As legislators, we have heard many employers say that they have offered additional hours and jobs to qualified workers who turn them down for this very reason. Government policy should not put a limit on how much someone works. We should encourage work.

Some programs, such as the Earned Income Tax Credit, Homestead Credit and Badgercare already have sliding scale elements to their administration. These programs show that the sliding scale concept works. A waiver from the Federal government will allow our state to work on ways to bring all public benefit programs in alignment.

As the State Senator for the 17th Senate District, I am committed to finding ways to take care of our citizens while encouraging every able-bodied adult to find work and contribute to our communities. We need our safety nets, but we also need a reasonable way to move beyond them. Sliding scales work.

For more information and to connect with me, visit my website <http://legis.wisconsin.gov/senate/17/marklein> and subscribe to my weekly E-Update by sending an email to Sen.Marklein@legis.wisconsin.gov. Do not hesitate to call 800-978-8008 if you have input, ideas or need assistance with any state-related matters.

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